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ABSTRACT

Seeking to further understand the potential donor pool represented by alumnae who were mature students graduating from the external degree program at a women's college, this study used a questionnaire survey to identify background and characteristics and collegiate and alumnae experiences of the external degree alumnae, and to identify differences between donors and nondonors on specific variables. The Stephens College Alumnae Survey was developed and distributed using Dillman's Total Design Method, and resulted in 460 usable surveys (a 72% return). Donors and nondonors differed significantly on several background/characteristic and collegiate/alumni experience variables such as year of graduation, marital status when a student, current employment status, class format, role models, whether that role model was a male faculty member, and perception of the quality of their Stephens College education. Results also confirmed what studies of younger alumnae have found, that a women's college education had a strong positive effect, and that time from graduation, awareness of happenings on campus, and participation in alumnae programs influence donor status. The study also found that, though the external degree students did not participate in residential campus life, they did form important, lasting relationships with faculty and staff. Thirteen references are included. (Author/JB)

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Women's College Alumnae of an External Degree Program: An Institutional Advancement Perspective

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ABSTRACT

A growing group of potential donors about which little is known are alumni who were mature students. This study establishes a benchmark of information from an institutional advancement perspective about alumnae of a women's college external degree program who were 23 years old or older when they were students.

Based on previous studies, the focus of the current study was (a) characteristics of donors and nondonors and (b) collegiate experiences of donors and nonors. Research questions identified background and characteristics and collegiate and alumnae experiences of the external degree alumnae, and identified differences between donors and nondonors on specific variables.

The Stephens College Alumnae Survey (SCAS) was developed and distributed using Dillman's Total Design Method, and resulted in a 72% return.

Donors and nondonors differed significantly on several variables. Two strong implications of the study are: 1) adult women students who graduate from the external degree program are a strong potential source of financial support, and 2) personal relationships with faculty and staff may substitute for participation in campus activities for adult students, which gives a new perspective to accepted definitions of involvement.

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Women's College Alumnae of an External Degree Program: An Institutional Advancement Perspective

INTRODUCTION

As private gifts become more important, higher education is becoming more sophisticated in soliciting donor support. The growing group of potential donors about which little is known are alumni who were mature students.

This research study was developed to address the lack of information about adult students, their donor patterns, their collegiate and alumni experiences, and how the women's college experience affects mature women students.

Based on studies of alumni (who were 18 to 22 years old when in school) and their donor behaviors, this study establishes a benchmark of information from an institutional advancement perspective about alumnae of a women's college external degree program who were 23 years old or older when they were students.

The Stephens College Alumnae Survey (SCAS) was developed from previous studies of traditional-aged students, and was distributed to all 705 graduates of the college's external degree program. The Total Design Method developed by Dillman (1978) was used to develop the questionnaire and to process the study. Responses from 460 of the 641 usable surveys yielded a 72% return.

Previous studies which formed the basis of this study focused on the women's college student, donor behavior and involvement in campus and alumni activities. Major sources of information about women's colleges alumnae are studies by the Women's College Coalition (1981, 1985). Researchers such as Beeler (1982), Caruthers (1973), Gardner (1975), Haddad (1986) and Keller (1982) have studied characteristics of donors and nondonors. Other researchers (e.g. Carlson, 1978; Dahl, 1981; McKee, 1975; and Nelson, 1988) explored the collegiate and alumni experiences of donors and nondonors.

The research questions in this study were:

1. What are the backgrounds and characteristics of graduates of a four-year women's college external degree program?
2. What are the backgrounds and characteristics of graduates of a four-year women's college external degree program which are different for donors and nondonors?
3. What were the collegiate experiences of graduates of a four-year women's college external degree program?
4. Were the collegiate experiences of graduates of a four-year women's college external degree program different for donors and nondonors?

An ex post facto design was used. Research questions 1 and 3, seeking the characteristics and experiences of a women's college external degree graduates, were answered by descriptive statistics. Research questions 2 and 4, seeking differences in characteristics and experiences of donors and nondonors, were answered through testing four null hypotheses. According to the scaling properties of the SCAS items, chi-square was used when the variables were nominal and t-tests were used when the dependent variables were continuous and presumed interval.

THE RESPONSES

Graduates of the external degree program range in age from 28 to 75. Two-thirds of the graduates are currently married and three-fourths were married when they attended Stephens. Most are employed full time, with incomes spread from less than $20,000 to more than $50,000.

Self improvement was the major reason that most entered the degree program. Twenty per cent said that Stephens' status as a women's college influenced them positively to attend, however almost two-thirds said that they had a different sense of themselves as women because of the Stephens experience.

There was a strong intensity of positive feelings for the college which was expressed in their reflections on the Stephens experience. More than 90 per cent said that, regardless of economic considerations, the Stephens experience had improved their quality of life.

The quality of the Stephens experience was rated highly by the graduates. An overwhelming majority of all respondents reported timely and regular communication with the program. Quality of advising and quality of instruction received high rankings.

The alumnae also compared the quality of a Stephens education favorably to other colleges. Those who continued their educations (more than half the respondents) ranked their Stephens preparation more than adequate.

One fourth of the graduates are donors to Stephens, but almost 10 per cent said they had never been asked to donate. The phonathon was an important means of solicitation.

THE FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

1. There were differences between donors and nondonors on the following background and characteristic variables: year of graduation, marital status when a student, current employment status, awareness of current happenings at Stephens, participation

in alumnae programs, and when asked to donate.

2. There were differences between donors and nondonors on the following collegiate and alumnae experience variables: class format, having a role model, if the role model was a male faculty member, how highly the quality of a Stephens education was compared to other colleges, how well Stephens prepared alumnae for continuing their educations, and reflections on the Stephens experience.

Male faculty are a significant group with donors. Do these faculty members encourage their students to give institutional support? Role models present an area for further study, particularly in this era of focus on mentors and the mentoring process. Are mentors and role models the same or different? If so, how are they the same or different?

3. The Total Design Method was useful as a process to gather information from external degree alumnae. Other institutions may want to use this tool to survey their alumni.

4. Results of this study confirmed results of previous studies conducted of 18 to 22-year old alumni in several ways, including the strong effect of a women's college education, time from graduation, awareness of happenings on campus and participation in alumnae programs.

Twenty per cent said that Stephens' status as a women's college influenced them positively to attend, however almost two-thirds said that they had a different sense of themselves as women because of the Stephens experience. These results reflect the same positive effect of a women's college education which previous research studies show for younger students. What are the factors which make this experience so powerful? Comparison studies of 18 to 22-year old students with older women students would add to the understanding of the women's college experience.

Alumnae who graduated 10 or more years prior to the study were more likely to be donors than more recent graduates. The finding that distance over time from graduation is strongly related to donor status for external degree graduates mirrors earlier studies of traditional-aged students. What are the reasons for this? As time passes, are positive experiences remembered as negative ones fade? Is the sense of mortality a factor?

Alumnae donors felt more aware of current happenings on campus, and donors participated in alumnae activities. One implication is that involving external degree alumnae in alumnae programs may develop donors. In this study, few external degree alumnae participated in alumnae programs. How can that participation be increased?

5. The SCAS did not identify any experiences which were analogous to the participation and leadership experiences of residential students, and this brings into question the emerging literature connecting physical participation in campus activities with donor status. It could be that faculty and staff provide the interaction and connections for external degree students which residential students experience in group living and extracurricular activities. Perhaps not having the options for physical involvement in external degree programs is less important for adults than for younger students who are often establishing their own identities. Adults in external degree programs maintain family, social and career relationships while in school. For younger students, the living units and extra-curricular activities may provide the support which adults have already developed before entering the external degree program. Astin's definition of involvement (1984) may be incomplete when considering the level of involvement displayed by these off-campus students.

One intriguing finding was that the participants in this study said they felt they had made lifelong friends from their collegiate experience. These friends were not other students. This finding implies a strong relationship with faculty and staff which should be explored further. External degree programs should investigate the relationships which mature students develop with faculty and staff members to identify components of the relationships.

6. A profile of the Stephens College external degree alumna donor can be drawn. She is married, but was single when she attended Stephens. She is 55 or older and graduated more than 10 years ago. She is retired or a full time homemaker. She is even more positive about her Stephens experience than her peers. She had a role model, and he was likely to be a male faculty member. She is solicited for donations through the phonathon. She participates in alumnae programs, and feels aware of current happenings at Stephens. She supports Stephens because she feels she is doing something worthwhile for the college.

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